

Supreme Civics

Concerned about the declining emphasis on civics in schools, retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor launched iCivics, a web-based education project for students and teachers.

Sandra Day O'Connor, retired Supreme Court Justice, the first woman appointed to the court—and videogame designer? But yes, Justice O'Connor is the driving force behind iCivics, a nonprofit organization designed to increase students' knowledge of civics through interactive computer games that focus on history, laws, and government.

"When I retired from the Supreme Court," she explained, "I noticed that the attacks directed at our judicial system were broader and more vitriolic than any I had heard in my lifetime. It seemed to me that many of these attacks stemmed from a basic misunderstanding of the role the judicial branch plays in our government. When I took a closer look at the problem, I saw that it wasn't just the courts that our citizens misunderstood. Only one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government, much less say what they do. The decline of civic education has left our nation ignorant of the role of government as a whole."

And she's not the only one who is concerned about this gap in students' education. Results from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that although the average score in civics for 4th graders has increased since 1998, scores at the 8th-grade level have remained stagnant and 12th-grade scores have declined (Dillon, 2011). In response, Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education, said, "The results confirm an alarming

Editor's note: For more information about iCivics, visit www.iCivics.org.



An Interview With Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

Patti Kinney

and continuing trend that civics in America is in decline. During the past decade or so, educational policy and practice appear to have focused more and more upon developing the worker at the expense of developing the citizen" (Dillon, 2011).

Patti Kinney, the NASSP associate director of middle level services, interviewed Justice O'Connor about the lack of civics education in most middle level and high schools and why and how she has chosen to help schools address this issue.

Patti Kinney: A recent report indicated that the majority of middle level and high school students have little understanding of our government and how it operates. Do you think civics education has been pushed to the side or do you see other reasons for this happening?

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor: Let's remember that America's public schools were founded to teach young people to be citizens. We realized long ago that the practice of democracy wasn't something passed along through our DNA—it must be taught anew with each new generation. Yet civic education had all but vanished from the curriculum.

Recent educational policies have unintentionally contributed to the problem of disappearing civics courses by assessing schools mainly according to students' performance in reading, math, and science. Teachers feel pressure to focus on subjects that are tested, which means that others, such as civics and history, get less attention.

That's why I founded the iCivics program: to put high-quality civics education materials out there for students, teachers, and schools to use. We are working to restore civic education to ensure that our democracy has a vibrant and robust future.

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Discussion guide available at www.nassp.org/pldiscuss1011

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Kinney: Were you interested in civics when you were in middle and high school?

Justice O'Connor: In grade school, I had a great history teacher who really inspired me. I spent my teen years in El Paso, TX, and civics and history was a big part of my education. Because it was Texas, I learned just about everything there is to know about Stephen F. Austin.

When I was young and up until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools. Today, those courses are very rare. Most students only take one semester of American government before they graduate from high school. For middle school, only three states have a civics course. That's a far cry from the role public schools had played in preparing students for citizenship through most of American history.

Kinney: What role do you see schools playing in helping students develop an understanding of and appreciation for civic responsibility?

Justice O'Connor: Because education remains primarily a state responsibility, states can—and do—still choose to prioritize civics alongside reading, math, and science. Florida, for example, recently adopted a bill requiring a civics course in seventh grade and a civics assessment in eighth grade. I hope other states will follow suit.

Many school districts and schools can and do choose to invest in a proper civics education. That doesn't have to come at the expense of science or math or reading. In fact, some of the best ways to teach reading incorporate civics materials. And individual teachers can also choose to embody excellence and make sure that civics remains a priority. This is especially true of social studies teachers, who often hold the important duty of training tomorrow's American citizens.

Ultimately, I want to see civics taught in more schools and our citizenry more informed about democracy and government. We know that there is a direct correlation between civic knowledge and political participation. By helping students expand their civic knowledge, I hope to contribute to increased participation in democratic processes.

To make it as easy as possible for schools and teachers to offer a quality civics education, iCivics offers all of its educational games and lesson plans absolutely free of charge. I want to see iCivics incorporated into as many middle and high school classrooms as possible. The program is designed to be used as part of an existing curriculum or as a stand-alone curriculum. Either way, it will help bring civics and government to life for students.

Kinney: What kind of support do you think civic education has or should have at the federal level?

Justice O'Connor: What is most needed is for local, state, and federal policymakers to recognize that preparing students for informed and engaged citizenship is just as important as preparing students for college and career. Policymakers must ensure that civic learning receives equal attention to math, English, and science when making decisions on funding, course schedules, standards, and accountability systems.

Kinney: Middle level students and most high school students are not yet allowed to vote, so how can we get them interested in issues that affect them directly?

Justice O'Connor: We have to reach students where they are, and they are in front of computers. Studies have shown that children spend 40 hours per week in front of a screen, and that is more time than they spend in school or with their parents. If we capture just a little bit of this time to get students thinking about government and civic engagement, it will be a big step in the right direction. I don't play videogames, but 97% of American teens do. I have watched numerous students play the iCivics videogames, and I am consistently amazed by their responses. Their faces light up as they learn a new game, and parents tell me that students don't want to go to sleep because they are too busy playing.

Kinney: What would you include in your ideal civics curriculum so that civics becomes real and relevant for today's students?

Justice O'Connor: Students should learn about how the government works by experiencing it. Through games, students can step into any role they choose: a judge, a member of congress, even the president, and they can do the jobs that those people do.

I believe this is a much better way to learn civics than simply memorizing facts. Facts are important, but students must also learn how to use them. The games convey information while teaching skills for effective civic engagement. Students practice critical thinking, problem solving, and persuasive argumentation to effect change. These are the skills we want them to use to participate in civic life.

Of course video games are only one tool for good teaching, so iCivics also offers lesson plans to put the games in the context of a curriculum that's aligned with state standards. In fact, by the end of this year, we expect to have an entire semester's worth of lesson plans that satisfy 100% of Florida's new standards for civics. That means a teacher in Miami can teach civics from beginning to end using our games and other materials—all without paying a single dollar.

Kinney: Your appointment to the Supreme Court was a great step forward for women's rights. How can promoting civics education in our schools help encourage underrepresented populations (women, minorities, and the like) to become more engaged in public service at the local, state, and federal levels?

Justice O'Connor: When you study civics you learn how, over history, the United States has increasingly fulfilled its promise to include all people—women, African Americans, and other minorities—to become full citizens in our democracy. Abolition, suffrage, the civil rights movement—those are inspiring stories that demonstrate that democracy is open to all Americans.

And I think it's important to show that civic participation means so much more than just casting a ballot. Democracy isn't something you do on Election Day and forget the other 364 days of the year. We also should be emphasizing public service, and that's something we've started to

do at iCivics. Students can now earn points by playing our games and then donate those points to projects that other students around the country are running to improve their local communities. And iCivics will donate [money] to the programs that get the most points.

By participating, children are seeing how their peers are making a difference—and maybe they'll be inspired to do something themselves. It's a pretty neat thing, to be able to turn their academic learning into something that makes a difference in real communities.

Kinney: What is your advice for school principals who want to increase their school's emphasis on civics education and make it an important part of their school and their students' lives?

Justice O'Connor: You are not just training our nation's future workers. You are bringing up the future citizens of the United States of America. Your students will, someday soon, collectively decide the fate of this great nation of ours. It is a solemn responsibility, and it is up to you to decide that teaching your children to become effective participants in our democracy is worth the investment—testing or no testing. So I urge you to discharge that duty with courage and the conviction that American democracy is worthy of your effort, and your time, and your passion. **PL**

REFERENCE

■ Dillon, S. (2011, May 4). Failing grades on civics exam called a "crisis." *New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com

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Justice Sandra Day O'Connor served as an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court from 1981 until 2006. She is the chair of iCivics, a web-based education project that encourages civic responsibility.

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